

Wildlife Okavango



Stunning jewel amid arid Kalahari

The Okavango Delta lives up to its reputation as a premier wildlife viewing location, writes **Tony Park**

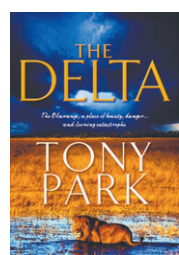


FROM the air it's easy to see why Botswana's Okavango Delta is known as the Jewel of the Kalahari. Islands of green papyrus and pampas grass lie like emeralds dangling from snaking blue necklaces of freshwater channels that separate this vast oasis from the arid country surrounding it.

On the first of two visits to the Okavango – at different ends of the price spectrum – I'm flying into a luxury camp from the drab, dusty safari town of Maun in an Australian-made Gippsland Airvan aircraft operated by local charter company Mack Air.

The Okavango River rises in the highlands of Angola and passes through a narrow strip of neighbouring Namibia before petering out in a series of channels into the Kalahari Desert in Botswana. This waterway never reaches the ocean.

We land at Xakanaxa (its pronounced Ka-ka-na-ka) airstrip and our local guide, Metsi, tells us to keep an eye out for cheetah as we pile into the open-top Land Rover for the short ride to camp. The spotted cats use the runway as a drag strip to get the edge on herbivores who keep the landing



field's grass nicely trimmed.

Xamanaxa is a tented camp and, while the rooms are made of canvas, that's where the similarities with camping ends.

Our elevated tent has a deck and an ensuite bathroom. It's tasteful, luxurious and remarkably cool, thanks to the sprinkler system that drips water on the vinyl fly sheet above.

The camp is set on the Khwai River, a tributary of the Okavango and, as we receive our briefing on the wooden deck overlooking the invitingly clear waters, we're reminded that swimming is forbidden when Popcorn, the camp's resident Nile crocodile, pops his head up to say hello.

As nice as the setting of the camp is, the real attraction in the delta is game viewing and we're eager to see if the region lives up to its reputation as a premier wildlife spotting location.

We're not disappointed on our first drive. Meandering among giant trees –



watered all year round by subterranean sources – we soon come across a pride of lions. What's nice about this family is that the king of the beasts – the pride male – is being particularly tolerant of his newest addition, a tiny cub who plays with his tail and then nuzzles up to dad's massive snout.

Babies seem to feature heavily on our subsequent drives as we come across a cute-enough-to-kidnap

SPOTTING WILDLIFE: Egrets perch on a buffalo in the Okavango Delta (top left); giraffes at a waterhole (above); a waterbuck (left); and a mekoro cruise through the delta (top right).

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leopard cub that slides in close to its mum and helps her scan the surrounding swamps for lunch. We also meet herds of buffalo and elephant with plenty of youngsters in tow.

One of the most amazing sightings is a jackal taking on a leopard. The cat's more than twice its size, but the jackal yaps and circles the annoyed feline while the jackal's female mate yells insults from the sidelines. Metsi says the jackals must have pups nearby, and they're bravely harassing the leopard to send it on its way.

Metsi tells us how the foresighted Chief Moremi II decided back in the 1960s to cordon off his traditional hunting grounds for use as a national park. This brought about the creation of the Moremi Game Reserve, the protected part of the Okavango Delta.

In between game drives, there's time to chill by the small pool at the camp, or to take a slow punt on the clear waters of

the Delta in a mekoro, a traditional canoe now made of fibreglass to help conserve the trees from which the vessels were once made.

Xakanaxa's a great place to stay and the game viewing has been all I hoped.

All drinks and meals are included in the rate, but it's at the upper end of the price range and in keeping with the Botswana Government's policy of going for high-yield, low-impact tourism which, translated, means fewer tourists paying lots of money.

For more adventurous visitors, there's a cheaper way to see the Okavango Delta and its amazing animal inhabitants. On the northeastern border of the Moremi Game Reserve is the Khwai River Conservancy, run by the local people from nearby Khwai Village.

As the conservancy is not a designated national park, visitors don't pay entrance fees and camping is cheap by Botswana standards. At the Khwai Development Trust's Magothlo Community Campsite, every cent of the 140 pula (about \$A80) a person a night camping fee goes back to the local community rather than into government coffers.

The campsite is beautiful but basic. In fact, there's nothing there and campers have to be totally self-sufficient. The party we're with on our second trip into the Delta has rented fully equipped Land Rovers from South Africa.

At night, we retire to the relative safety of rooftop tents on top of the trucks soon after dark. That night we hear the rasping cough of a leopard strolling around the camping area.

The next day we head off along the banks of the Khwai River and see lion, buffalo, elephant, hippo and even a pack of one of the continent's most endangered predators, the strikingly coloured African painted dog.

As the day comes to an end, we follow a time-honoured tradition that stays the same in Africa whether you're paying top dollar or travelling on a budget, and have a sundowner beer as we watch the red sun bleed into the waters of the Okavango Delta.

Tony Park is the author of seven African novels, including *The Delta* set in the Okavango Delta. He stayed at Xakanaxa Camp courtesy of the Africa Safari Co (africa.safarico.com.au) and organised his own trip to the Khwai Development Trust's campsite (khwai-trust.com).